

Can I just vent? - Bulldog Catholic

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Q: What is the problem with gossip? I mean, sometimes I just need to vent.

A: Thank you for this question. In many cases, even being willing to ask the question (and being open to an answer) is a sign that one's heart is in the right place. All of us have "blind spots" when it comes to our attitudes, words, and actions. Gossip can be one of those sins in our life that is there but we rarely even notice it until we see its immediate effects. In asking this question, not only are you aware of this tendency, but it sounds like you are also open to change. That's a great place to start.

What are we talking about when we are talking about gossip? First, gossip is different than "venting". I would make the distinction that a person could vent about their own situation with little danger (other than becoming a complainer, which will be the topic of a future column).

On the other hand, gossip is about others. At its most general, gossip is "talking about others". There are three forms this can take:

1. The least potentially harmful form is talking about others' good qualities. This wouldn't be a sin at all, but the ancient rabbis cautioned against even this because, as we all know, a conversation about someone else can start off with their good qualities and then turn in a bad direction. We all know why: the good things are boring! We want to know the bad things about a person's character or situation.
2. The next level in "talking about others" is detraction. This is the technical term for gossip. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that a person is guilty of detraction if they, "without objectively valid reason, disclose another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them" (CCC 2477). It is also continuing to talk about those faults or failings for the purpose of curiosity and not in order to offer help or assistance.
3. The worst step in the category of "talking about others" is calumny. This unusual little term refers to lying about the faults of another in order to damage their reputation. It is clearly the worst because malicious intent is always present (and because it involves lying).

But back to gossip!

I'm glad you asked about this particular issue, because gossip is a really big deal. I can't think of anything that more often poisons relationships than gossip. Of course, there are other ways that we can hurt each other as human beings, but gossip is everywhere. Gossip always infects and corrupts. We all know this. Talking about the faults or wounds of others causes dissension in families, kills lifelong friendships, and breeds mistrust among peers. It is diabolical.

| Gossip always infects and corrupts.

I know that that can sound a little excessive, but I don't think I am exaggerating. I used the term "diabolical" on purpose. In Dante's *Inferno*, the deepest circle of Hell is for the sin of treachery or betrayal. Dante placed famous betrayers in this lowest pit and among them are people who could be classified as "betrayers of family, country, guests, and benefactors".

What does this have to do with gossip?

You could call gossip "everyday betrayal". It is a real betrayal, but since it happens so often, the temptation can be to quickly excuse the betrayal as "venting" or the even more deceiving euphemism: "sharing". And yet, gossip does not only destroy relationships with each other, it renders our relationship with God void. The Letter of James does not mince words when it comes to watching how we talk about others: "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). To think that some of the worst culprits are those of us who go to church a lot! And Saint James says that, for anyone who gossips, their attempts at religion are worth nothing!

There are probably some people in your life who do not see gossip as a problem. In fact, they may see gossip as a “connector”. They view it as a good thing; it is one of the ways they bond with others. In these cases, how you proceed is tricky. Often, when talking with them, it is not enough for you to patiently listen; they want you to contribute. They want to be validated in their assessment of the other person and can be upset if you don’t offer some piece of agreement or gossip in return.

Connection is good. Human beings connect with each other through words, sharing ideas, stories, and experiences. And using words to talk about others is an easy method. Gossip is so attractive because it not only serves to scratch our curiosity itch, but it also appeals to the “rubbernecker” in all of us. This is why we slow down on the highway to look at the scene of an accident but don’t slow down to look at the sunset on the horizon. This is why “the news” is dominated by “bad news”. This is why networks have to add in “feel good” stories at the end of a broadcast; because the news that grabs our attention is the bad stuff. The same is true for our conversations: the news about others that grabs us is the bad stuff.

| It is a substitute for real connection.

At its best, gossip is merely a substitute. It is a substitute for real connection. It is a substitute for real processing. And it is a substitute for real action. Rather than addressing the person themselves and their upsetting behavior, we are tempted to tell everyone except the one person who could actually benefit from the conversation. At its worst, it is poison that makes life unbearable. This is why gossip is so bad.

Next time, we will take a look at how to deal with the gossipers (both when it is ourselves and when it is another person). Until then, it is worth reflecting on Saint Paul’s words to Christians in Ephesus, “Say only the good things that men need to hear; things that will really help them” (Ephesians 4:29).